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Trust and the Social Positioning Process*

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Abstract

When setting out, defending and exploring the implications of his specific position in social ontology Tony Lawson highlights the importance of trust. Despite the significance he attaches to trust Lawson does not provide an extended elaboration of the nature of trust but rather considers it in various contexts where his primary focus lies elsewhere. The purpose of the current paper is to examine how trust features in Lawson's discussions. I identify three phases of argumentation where trust has some significant prominence in his work. Most recently Lawson when outlining his general socio-philosophical ontology describes trust as the essential glue binding society together. In earlier contributions he approaches trust from a developmental perspective and at times sees trust as a condition required for generalised human flourishing. I argue that a coherent and compelling account of the nature and significance of trust emerges from these discussions and that it is one that deserves further elaboration and critical attention. Resources in the form of certain complementary perspectives are identified that may help to flesh out aspects of Lawson's account of trust.

Key words: Trust, ontology, collective practice, norm

JEL codes: B40, B41, B50

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Trust and the Social Positioning Process

1. Introduction

Tony Lawson has over the last three decades or so been concerned with setting out and defending a specific social ontology – that is in providing a general account of the social world. This social ontology provides a basis for questioning much of what goes on in mainstream economics. He shows that the implicit ontology presupposed by the methods of mainstream economics is unsustainable. Lawson demonstrates that once an ontological perspective is adopted the metaphysical commitments implied by these methods do not really constitute a serious contender as an account of the nature of the social realm. The profound problems associated with mainstream economics at this level have been masked by the persistent ontological neglect that has for so long characterised the discipline and which Lawson has done much to challenge. Lawson demonstrates that the ontological position he outlines has important advantages over not only the impoverished ontological vision implied by mainstream methods but also other altogether more coherent and carefully articulated alternative positions in social ontology.¹ It is his defence of a particular social ontology that informs his various constructive contributions to methodology, ethics, the history of thought as well as his developed accounts of the nature of institutions, gender systems, money, and the corporation.²

Among the various categories that are important to Lawson as he articulates, elaborates and explores the implications of the general social ontology he defends is that of trust. A concern with trust has been a significant feature of his output over the years. Lawson emphasises in more recent contributions that our capacities of trusting and being trustworthy are nothing less than the ‘glue’ that binds social reality together – they are “the adhesive that enables the organisational structure to achieve a degree of binding” (2014: 27). In earlier writings Lawson displays what might usefully be referred to as a developmental orientation toward trust. In *Economics and Reality*, for example, he writes: “whereas in infancy the experience of trust, stability, sameness, and continuity is achieved through the parental maintenance of predictable caring routines, in adult life it is obtained in the routine modes of conduct that facilitate ‘going on’ generally. The performance of routines, in other words, is not only essential to the reproduction of social structure but is equally fundamental to the production and reproduction of each individual personality” (1997a: 181). When considering the implications of his ontological framework for ethics Lawson once again makes reference to trust suggesting specifically that “generalised human flourishing requires the proliferation of both trustworthiness and (where appropriate) trust” (2001: 65). Lawson thus sees trust as fundamental to any adequate account of the nature of the social world.

Despite the importance that Lawson assigns to trust it remains a relatively under theorised category within his framework at least compared to the comprehensive accounts he offers of such terms as emergence, positions, collective practices, rights, obligations and norms. Trust is rarely Lawson’s primary focus - rather he comments on it as he addresses other issues and topics. Indeed some critical

¹ For a sustained comparison of his own ontological project with that set out by John Searle, see Lawson (2016c).

² For an outline and defence of Lawson’s approach to ontological theorising see Lawson (2015a). His treatment of institutions, gender systems, the corporation and money are detailed respectively in Lawson (2015b, 2007, 2015c and 2016a).

commentators on Lawson's ontological project explicitly call for further clarification regarding his emphasis on trust.³

In this paper I pinpoint three phases of argumentation where trust figures especially prominently in Lawson's work and argue that a coherent and compelling account of the nature and significance of trust emerges from these discussions and that it is one that deserves further elaboration.⁴ Particular aspects of Lawson's account of trust that he has only partially elaborated upon are considered including how trust relates to processes of social positioning, the pervasive and often hidden nature of trust and its connection with human dependence/vulnerability. Resources are identified that can be used to productively extend Lawson's developmental treatment of trust. In terms of his comments on ethics it is noted that on his understanding trust is primary in providing certain necessary conditions for human flourishing and yet limited in always needing to be significantly supplemented. Clarifying and drawing out some of the implications of Lawson's treatment of trust can help us better understand both his general ontological framework and his account of certain key social existents central to economics.

Lawson's recent emphasis on trust as the glue binding society together is considered in section 2. Important features of this account of trust that Lawson only points to are explored in section 3. The developmental account of trust is the focus of section 4 where complementary perspectives are also discussed. How trust ties in with Lawson's discussion of ethics and human flourishing is explored in section 5. Concluding remarks follow.

2. Positions, Collective Practices, Norms and Trust

In order to appreciate the significance that Lawson attaches to trust it is necessary to review various key elements of his ontological framework. In fact quite a lot of context setting is required as, in his latest ontological elaborations, trust figures only after a series of other categories (emergence, collective practices, norms, etc.) have been introduced. If Lawson's recent comments on trust are considered without sufficient attention being paid to this broader framework their significance can be easily missed.

For Lawson the category of social reality denotes the set or totality of all phenomena whose existence *necessarily* depends on human interaction. Lawson's starting point is an assessment that social reality is constituted in large part by *emergent totalities*, where people and things broadly conceived become incorporated as components.

A key category for Lawson is that of emergence and in particular the emergence of social totalities. He takes the term emergence to relate to the appearance of novelty or something previously absent or unprecedented. Lawson's characterisation of emergence emphasises the role of *relational organisation* and recognises the operation of both efficient and formal causality.⁵ He suggests a totality is a system

³ For example Searle (2016: 402), while acknowledging the limited range of work consulted, suggests Lawson's claim that trust constitutes the glue binding society together is both insufficiently elaborated and problematic.

⁴ A number of contributions have explored how an approach to trust informed by realist social theory can be developed, see in particular Colledge et al, (2014), Morgan and Sheehan (2015) and Reed (2001), the focus in this paper is more narrowly on Lawson's contributions rather than the wider realist literature.

⁵ Lawson's most detailed discussion of emergence and related concepts can be found in Lawson (2013a). For consideration of how his account of emergence compares with the treatment offered by Searle see Lawson (2012). For comparison of Lawson's analysis of emergence with other prominent contemporary positions see Pratten (2013b).

of organised, usually more basic, or pre-existing, elements that reveals a coherence or integrity at the system level. Totalities he argues emerge through the relational organisation, perhaps with some modification, of such pre-existing elements, the latter being effectively harnessed and organised as components. How the elements are organised makes a difference; it is due to their organisation that the totality has properties that extend beyond those of the individual elements. The influence that relational organisation has is, according to Lawson, that of formal causality. Some of the elements will be organised so that they are tied to an environment in some way. Thus he sees emergence as always occurring in a context. Since an environment appears along with any totality, it too he views as an emergent. In the case of social totalities, Lawson recognises that the elements so organised either may or may not themselves be socially constituted.

Lawson argues that any system or totality that emerges in this manner, since it is constituted in part by the way in which the components are arranged or relationally organised, is irreducible to the sum total of its isolated components. So he sees ontological reduction of a dis-aggregative sort as being proscribed. Along similar lines he suggests that any emergent powers of efficient causation of an emergent totality are causally irreducible in that they are not predictable from the causal powers of these elements when considered in isolation. According to Lawson, causal reduction of any simple sort is also invalid.

As a way of illustrating some of these points Lawson draws on familiar everyday examples. Thus he invites readers to imagine the bricks, mortar, wood, panes of glass, cement, etc., that make up a house or church or dance hall, etc., being rearranged in a merely random fashion. He notes that it is unlikely that the outcome would have either the form or the causal properties of the original building. He insists that it is the arrangement of the parts that makes the building feasible and views the arrangement/organisation as a type of formal causation that influences the causal powers possessed by the totality. Elsewhere he changes the example to that of a bridge:

“Consider the construction of a bridge. Here various items or materials may be brought together to form components of a totality, including, perhaps, pieces of wood, brick, stone, cast and/or wrought iron, mild, high-tensile and/or alloy steel, aluminium, steel reinforced and or pre stressed concrete, glass, reinforced plastic, and so forth. These are organised or assembled, in a specific environment, and in a manner such that the resulting totality allows the crossing of a space perhaps containing a river (whilst the resulting totality itself can survive potential stress caused by such factors as bending, compression, impact, oscillation, pressure, ... etc.). The totality that is the bridge clearly emerges simultaneously with the organising relational structure of the materials enlisted as components, and significantly, the latter organising structure makes a (causal) difference to the emergent causal powers of the totality” (2014: 25).

In the case where an emergent totality includes people amongst the components it comprises, within Lawson’s framework, a *community*.⁶ He uses the term *artefact* to refer to forms of totality where there are no human components and sees the components themselves as likely to be artefacts of one form or another.

The term social positioning captures for Lawson the process whereby, through general acceptance by members of a community, human individuals, things or other phenomena become incorporated as components of emergent totalities. Lawson sees social positioning as centrally involving the generalised acceptance of the following three elements in regards to any item that is thereby positioned: “(i) the

⁶ See Pratten (2013b) for some reflections on Lawson’s characterisation of the community and comparisons with certain alternative perspectives.

allocation of an agreed status, (ii) its practical placement as a component of a totality, and (iii) the harnessing of certain of its capacities already possessed to serve as one or more system functions of the totality” (2016a: 963). With regard human positioning he sees the third element as being achieved via the allocation of certain positional rights and obligations.

As a way of illustrating this positioning process Lawson considers how human beings in a university are positioned as lecturers, students, librarians, cleaners etc. Each case of positioning involves both the acquisition of a status or identity (of lecturer or student) and also a practical placement as a component within the teaching and or research structure of the university. According to Lawson this process involves the acquisition of rights and obligations with each right (obligation) of one position being linked to an obligation (right) tied to a different position. The right of students to attend lectures and tutorials is matched to the obligation of lecturers to prepare and provide them. The right of both lecturers and students to access and use specific lecture theatres is matched by the obligation those making up the university administration have to fund, service and maintain them. These matching rights and obligations are for Lawson both social relations and power relations. It is positions, rights and obligations and the *collective practices* (see below) associated with them that provide the organising structure of the communities of which they are a part. In the case of the university, Lawson states that the rights and obligations acquired are such as to ensure that the positioned participants can and do interact in ways that serve the university’s aim of dispensing education and facilitating research.

Turning from communities to artefacts Lawson illustrates the positioning process in this context by noting how panes of glass may be positioned (identified and practically placed) as windows in a house, and blocks of wood as doors. In this process certain capacities of the positioned objects get to serve as *system functions*. Thus, from the various capacities that each pane of glass has it is that of allowing light through whilst withstanding the weather that is picked out when it is positioned as a window and it is this capacity that comes to serve as the pane’s system function.

Both the establishment of a given position as well as the allocation of people or objects to it are ultimately Lawson emphasises a matter of community acceptance. It is important to recognise that by acceptance here Lawson is not suggesting agreement. Acceptance may only imply a begrudging willingness to comply or a hesitant preparedness to go along with. For Lawson the establishment of either a position or the determination of who or what should occupy it can come about by a legitimate community authority in effect declaring something to be so or in an altogether more spontaneous manner. Thus an appointments panel may select a new staff member following a set of strict procedures but equally and yet far less formally an emergent protest group may spontaneously position and be guided by a perhaps rather reluctant leader.

An especially important category for Lawson is that of collective practice. To be a practice, according to Lawson, is to be a way of proceeding or going on that is actually pursued or followed. Here the emphasis is on both a way of proceeding as well as on the fact of it actually being followed. To be engaged in the activity of say eating an apple or running for a train is not on Lawson’s reading yet to be involved in following a practice. If an individual regularly peels an apple in a certain set manner before eating it, this may constitute a practice, a *way* of eating the apple, or at least, preparing it for consumption.

Lawson does not intend the term collective practice to express something that will somehow be carried through other than by individuals (or groups of individuals). It is collective not in relation to who performs it but in the sense that within the relevant community it is an accepted or done way for an individual or group to proceed to reach a particular end in a given context. Effectively it is a practice

that has been positioned. As such it is a practice that has the status of being accepted as legitimate in the given circumstances within the community. For Lawson a collective practice is an accepted practice in the sense of being recognised or acknowledged as a currently done way within a specific community. In order to get by, in order to participate at all, in a particular community individuals generally adhere to the relevant collective practices.

Acceptance in this context is for Lawson essentially a form of collective or community recognition. The idea of individual practices being accepted in the relevant sense is in effect a status. It is community wide recognition that grounds the collective practices that serve to signal ways of proceeding as being the done ways of proceeding within a community. A collective practice then being an accepted way of proceeding within a community is a way of proceeding with which each community participant typically complies recognising (if often only implicitly) that this constitutes a condition of community participation.

The emergence of a specific collective practice Lawson suggests is consistent with a certain amount of variety at the level of individual practices in a relevant domain. It is at this point in Lawson's most recent elaborations where the notion of a norm enters the picture. A norm for Lawson is now understood as any component or aspect of a collective practice that is compulsory and thus that ought not to be deviated from. So interpreted a norm might be reformulated as a segment or an aspect of a collective practice that carries within itself, if typically implicitly, an obligation. But understood in this manner a norm remains a material component of a collective practice. And importantly, a norm for Lawson can exist implicitly without notions of obligation being linguistically articulated.⁷

Lawson highlights that where a set of ways of proceeding are constituted as examples of a collective practice, as community-accepted ways of proceeding, this involves the participation of effectively all members of the community. The fundamental point or function of collective practices *qua* collective practices, according to Lawson, is the coordination of community life. They are an essential part of the organising structure of all totalities that are communities facilitating the coordination of the separate activities and goals of individual participants. The organising structure can work in this way only to the extent that there is a broad adherence to the community accepted ways of proceeding. So collective practices, in being constituted as ways in which things are in fact done in a community in specific contexts, are Lawson notes, by that token also normative in nature. By indicating how things are done, they at the same time inform potential community participants how things should be done.

Within the framework Lawson outlines to be a community participant is to enjoy the rights of participation as well as the obligations that go with it. Each participant anticipates that other participants will conform to the obligations implicit in accepted collective practices, and has the right to object, issue rebukes, and so undermine individual behaviours interpreted as deviant (relative to those collective practices). Such objections and rebukes reflect at a concrete level the broader community requirement that currently accepted collective practices be conformed with. Lawson suggests that to the extent that it is everywhere structured through accepted collective practices social being is continuously subject to the wielding of social systematic power by all of us over each other.

Now it is typically only once these features of his social ontology have been outlined that Lawson, in his recent discussions, brings in trust. The following passage is representative of how trust features in these accounts:

⁷ According to Lawson within linguistic communities norms can always be codified and where they are rules are thereby established. For further detail on his account of norms and rules, see Lawson (2016b).

“Notice that the role of rights and obligations in structuring social life presupposes the human capacities of being able to be trustworthy and to be trusting of others, of being willing and able both to make and to keep promises and other commitments, and to believe that others can and will do so. It should be clear that these human capacities are necessary conditions for the interactions involved to occur, for obligations in particular to be efficacious. As such these capacities of trusting and being trustworthy, etc., qualify for being considered as the glue of social reality, as the adhesive that enables the organisational structure to achieve a degree of binding” (2014: 27).

For Lawson the positioning process presupposes a background of trust. It is the exercise of the human capacities of trusting and being trustworthy that ensures that human society does not fall apart and where these capacities are not sufficiently exercised integrity at the system level is threatened. Trust and the social positioning process are intimately connected and fundamental in Lawson’s account of social reality:

“the community, constituted through the organising of human beings among its components, is the most basic form of social totality... In this context, and given that social phenomena are just as fluid as non-social phenomena, a central question clearly is what is it that binds together often disparate human individuals as components? My answer is that it is the positioning system, whereby individuals with the capacities both to trust and be trustworthy slot into community/system positions that are inter- and intra-related by way of positional rights and obligations. For the rights attached to one position match obligations somewhere and usually attached to different positions, and so serve to bind together the relevant position occupants. In short the positional rights/obligations relational framework is pivotal to the achieving of order and stability within a social world inevitably characterised by transformation, and, as such, I suggest warrants being recognised as ontologically rather fundamental” (2016d: 447-8).

3. Vulnerability and the Pervasiveness of Trust

In order to appreciate the full significance that Lawson assigns to trust it is helpful to elaborate further on certain aspects of the social positioning process and draw out some implications of his analysis that he only briefly mentions.

Trust for Lawson seems to operate as a primary attitude or background expectation that does not itself require prior justification. On Lawson’s account trust is our being already engaged in organised communities and others appearing to us as fellow community members who are our partners (actual and potential co-operators) in routine and complex social interactions. Lawson sees trust as a primitive orientation to other community participants where it is expected, or taken for granted, that they will perform their part in co-operative activities. Trust on this reading involves not only a particular individual recognising others as members of a relevant community but also a presumption both that they will in turn recognise her as a person positioned as a community participant and that that status will influence their unreflective treatment of her. Trust is here viewed as among the constitutive conditions of social interaction that make collective practices possible. Without trust the kind of reciprocities and subtle co-ordinations associated with collective practices would not be feasible. Lawson writes:

“the reason that any individual can indeed take it for granted, i.e., rely on, and come to believe that he or she can rely on, the actions of others is that all those involved are always acting as practically positioned components of an organised emergent community, where the general function of the various organising collective practices is precisely to facilitate community coordination. Specifically, it is the notion of an emergent community that delimits the set of relevant others, along with a structure of obligations that allows beliefs to be formed that in certain circumstances others

are acting consistently with an individual's own goals. In particular, it grounds a belief that the effective cooperation of certain others in a particular activity can be taken for granted. Thus in the example of a symphony orchestra, the various musicians are amongst its separate components bound together by appropriate facilitating rights and obligations and collective practices, etc. Being components of a particular totality means that the various individuals *qua* positioned musicians actively cooperate; that is the point of the community that is the orchestra. Here each musician can with reason take it for granted, indeed trust, that he or she is playing an instrument in a context where, because of the generalised acceptance of the organising obligations etc., others are also playing their instruments in an appropriate way" (2016c: 369).

From this kind of perspective trust is a pervasive climate of expectation that ensures, prior to and independently of any further processes of social positioning, that we relate to community participants as potential interaction partners. Trust is what initially allows others to appear as persons in a community with whom one engages in person appropriate community accepted ways – that is, in ways that are appropriate to the activity and within the community in question.

Examining how Lawson views the relation between trust and the acquisition of rights and eventually obligations helps reveal why he prioritises trust to such a significant extent. He writes: "Rights and obligations rest on a shared belief that every member, or at least a relevant subset, of the community has implicitly 'agreed' or 'accepted' to bide by, or go along with them, where such 'agreement' or 'acceptance' can arise in any of a number of ways ... Where members of the community (fallibly) believe certain collective agreements are in place they act on these beliefs and conform to the practices implicated, trusting that others will do so too. The contents of these beliefs ... thus both condition individual practices and are reproduced through the sum total of these practices" (2016c: 366). Generally then collective practices and norms are only actual and effective to the extent that we can have confidence that they are authoritative for other community participants, and hence that we can trust that others are bound to them; this includes being bound by expressions of disapproval and formal punishments when those collective practices and norms are transgressed. This is not to reduce collective practices, norms and rules to trust since they possess a specificity and concreteness within Lawson's framework that trust typically lacks; they orient individual practices and provide justifications for action. They ground particular expressions of disapproval and acts of censure and punishment. Trust is presupposed in order to acquire rights. Meanwhile continued trust in the context of normal community engagements is promoted by rights being reliably held. Rights though are not an alternative to trust since trust in the possession of rights is required if they are to operate at all.

For Lawson trust seems to be fundamentally linked to our nature as dependent or vulnerable beings. Lawson writes: "We live amongst, affect and depend upon others. In this, from birth onwards, we necessarily trust and value trustworthiness in others...Think, for example, of how we depend on the testament of others in buying goods, using data, motoring, getting directions, or just in reading the newspaper or watching the television. Think of how we trust taxi-drivers, all aspects of air travel provision, doctors, our children's teachers, etc., etc. But think too of how we need others to trust us if we are to take up responsible positions as parents, teachers, doctors, taxi-drivers, team players, group musicians, close friends, professional advisors, etc" (2001: 65). We are intrinsically vulnerable with our ordinary lives in society exposing us to the will of others with whom, typically, our connection is unchosen. Our extensive dependence on unchosen relations to others begins with infancy and childhood, and continues throughout life. Trust, on Lawson's account, is an attitude or orientation that anticipates that the other will have and display goodwill or solidarity toward me under conditions in which I am dependent or vulnerable. We cannot avoid being intrinsically dependent on others but trust allows us to make an accommodation with this dependence and cooperate nonetheless.

Social life despite the stability often promoted by its collective practices is full of substantial risks. We are not isolated individuals but deeply dependent on numerous, sometimes anonymous, others for even basic elements of everyday living. Within communities we interact continuously with others in ways that expose us to their potential cruelty, carelessness and indifference. Trust initially arises in a context where we have no option but to accept others coming close enough to care for us. By doing so those others are simultaneously sufficiently close to cause harm. As we are enrolled into communities we take it for granted that others will interact with us appropriately, that they will respect us as community participants. The gap between the dangers accompanying our everyday encounters with others and the typical disregard we display toward these dangers highlights that trust represents a fundamental - taken for granted - condition underpinning our continuing social interactions. Trust is the original orientation we adopt in our relations with other community participants - it opens up the possibility of us being introduced into the life of a community. Trust in the goodwill of another that we will not be harmed by them corresponds to allowing them to come close and interact with us and forgetting the depth of our dependence and vulnerability.

In recognising that trust is one of the constitutive conditions required for social interaction Lawson also emphasises how pervasive it is and how it operates in a largely unnoticed, implicit and hidden manner. He notes how trust is often implicit: "To say to others 'it is raining', 'take an aspirin for your headache' ... is to say 'trust me, act on what I say, I would do so in your situation', or just 'trust me, in your position this is what I would do'. To utter any remark, implying at some level 'trust me act on this, I would in your situation' is to reveal solidarity with others" (2001: 65-6). The kind of account Lawson offers suggests that trust is a factor that tends towards invisibility with its primacy and importance being revealed only when it breaks down or is threatened. Trust typically operates unnoticed with attention directed to the collective practices it facilitates. We recognise one another as community participants initially in a pre-reflective way through our enrolment in existing communities and their collective practices premised on unnoticed attitudes and expectations. Trust operates as a default orientation and it is distrust that requires explanation and/or justification. Trust may be subject to rational correction and modification – we may learn to qualify our trust or distrust and it may be necessary to do so but trust is not installed through some rational and explicit assessment of outcomes. Distrust is doubt of the others goodwill and solidarity and requires us to maintain an attitude of vigilance. From the kind of view Lawson adopts distrust is not merely an alternative attitude to trust rather it is fundamentally parasitic upon trust and can corrode the constitutive conditions of social interaction (2015b: 378-379).

It is the view that trust is a pervasive factor that leads Lawson, when outlining his account of the nature of the modern corporation, to carefully clarify how his own use of the term community differs from its use in parts of the relevant literature. He notes how sometimes the term community is used to designate a particular kind of organisational form distinguished by its reliance on relations of trust. Lawson highlights that his own use of the term community is quite different arguing that within the framework he forwards "all 'organisational forms', indeed all social entities that include human beings as components, are forms/examples of communities and ... that all are organised through relations of rights and obligations that rest on the exercise of human capacities of trusting and being trustworthy, so that trust and trustworthiness are necessarily all pervasive and basic" (2015d: 7).

From the perspective Lawson develops it may be appropriate to see the breaking of trust as involving a kind of betrayal, the undermining of a significant human bond rather than a reliable but indifferent mechanism. With every trust that is broken it would seem our way of being with others in a community is in a certain sense weakened. When a trust is betrayed something quite basic holding us together in a community is compromised. Other than noting that where trust is eroded communities are in danger of falling apart this is not a theme that Lawson himself develops when discussing trust but it

seems consistent with his account and brings him into line with certain strands of recent philosophical writings on trust.⁸

4. A Developmental Orientation to Trust

Alongside (and in fact predating) the emphasis on trust as a precondition for social interaction, that is as the glue that serves to bind a community together, Lawson also endorses a developmental orientation toward trust and its priority. According to Lawson trust can be understood as responding to a basic, unconscious, psychological need for inner or ontological security – that is a need for a sense of continuity, stability and sameness and the avoidance of radical disruption. This fundamental need is initially attended to by predictable caring routines being established by an infant’s immediate caregivers and thereafter by the characteristic routine modes of conduct prevalent throughout a community. On this view from very early on and through processes of psychological development we encounter people with trust.

This developmental perspective on trust is expressed consistently and in numerous places in Lawson’s writings, it can be found in contributions stretching across a period of more than twenty years. Thus in a paper on situated rationality he writes:

“It would seem that at the level of the unconscious is a basic need for inner security grounding a generalised disposition towards the maintenance of trust in the natural world and the avoidance of anxiety, a disposition that is in practice fulfilled through, if amongst other things, the doing of familiar things routinely... because an orientation to the avoidance of anxiety occurs early on between the infant through his or her interaction with the closest guardian, typically the mother, and because it occurs before any significant acquisition of language, the mechanisms developed to counteract the development of anxiety are in part at least, unconscious ones. As the infant grows into an adult, the controlling of anxiety remains a basic need or disposition” (1997b: 117).

The developmental perspective has been retained without significant amendment as Lawson’s account of the nature of the social realm has evolved. Thus in a paper only recently published he notes:

“Certainly, it is clear that human beings are frequently disposed to engage in routinized forms of conduct even when there are no collective practices in place, and one obvious and common explanation of the noted phenomenon is a human need for, or one that is (or appears to be) satisfied by a significant degree of continuity, stability and sameness in daily affairs, the avoidance of radical disruption. It would seem that at the level of the unconscious is a basic need for inner security grounding a generalised disposition towards the maintenance of trust in the world and the avoidance of anxiety, a disposition that is in practice fulfilled or anyway met through, if amongst other things,

⁸ Baier’s 1986 paper is often credited with having prompted a resurgence of interest in the topic of trust within philosophy. In this recent work two broad perspectives on trust have been identified and referred to as the ‘predictive’ and ‘affective’ views respectively (see Faulkner 2014: 1977-78 and Stern 2017). The predictive view recognises that trust is bound up with dependence and links expectations about whether this dependence will be satisfied to beliefs concerning the likelihood the trusted party will act in a reliable way. In this sense, just as I might trust the ice to carry my weight because I have seen others walk across the frozen stream, I might trust a builder to construct a robust and safe extension on my house because I know he has done similar work for others or know that concern for his reputation will encourage him to do so. The ‘affective’ approach also sees trust as involving dependence, but adds a further dimension with dependence serving to motivate the trusted party to act appropriately. On this broader view if trust fails then I will feel resentment or perhaps even betrayal. If the builder constructs an unsafe or shoddy extension where I was trusting him in the predictive sense I would legitimately feel annoyed for having misinterpreted his interests or failed to carefully enough review his record. If I trusted the builder in the second affective sense and had expected my dependence on him to inform his interactions with me then I may feel resentful or betrayed. It is some such fuller notion of trust that Lawson too seems to be setting out.

the doing of familiar things routinely. It can be argued that the psychological origins of ontological security are to be found in basic anxiety-controlling mechanisms, hierarchically ordered as components of personality. The generation of feelings of trust in others, as the deepest element of the basic security system, depends substantially upon predictable and caring routines established by parental figures when the individual was an infant” (2016b: 272).

Lawson, despite continuing to reference this developmental perspective, chooses not to elaborate on it in a sustained fashion. It is useful here to consider how this view of trust might be extended and how it relates to the emphasis on trust as the glue binding the community together.

This kind of perspective on trust might be extended to incorporate an analysis of the initial development of a sense of self-worth and value by drawing on certain recent contributions to the trust literature.⁹ Lawson points to the circumstances where infants remain profoundly dependent on their immediate caregivers – were it not for the cooperation of these caregivers they would simply not survive. It is their extensive dependence that requires infants to affectively assume and anticipate that they will be cared for and that their needs will be attended to. In due course they come to feel the weight and steadiness of the concern of their immediate caregivers. It may perhaps, as Bernstein notes, be somewhat misleading to call infants original behaviour toward caregivers one of trust. Rather than infants learning to trust their primary caregivers it may be better to characterise them as learning a fundamental antecedent to trust – namely they develop a sense of their own self-worth and value. Infants in being able to count on their needs being met and the continuing attention of their caregivers and in thus feeling cared for gradually appreciate that they matter and are of value. As Bernstein expresses it: “What is thus attained is the child’s experiential sense of what the normal and suitable response to her presence is, and, in light of that treatment and response, her intrinsic worth” (2015: 243). The establishment of routines whereby expectations are developed and then continually met engender a sense of being of worth or mattering, which is in turn reinforced by those routines being maintained. Interactions between infant and primary caregivers establish for the infant its standing as being intrinsically valuable as the treatment received from sufficiently attentive caregivers is internalised.

Trust, or a sense of trust, can then be seen as emerging through a developmental sequence. When the expectation of being treated as a community participant with intrinsic worth is automatic and spontaneous and once the possibility of disappointment has been learned, the child can be said to trust her intimate caregivers. Trust, Bernstein suggests, “inherits and becomes the primary bearer of those pre-reflective value assumptions and action expectations” (2015: 255). The child will trust in others when she routinely sees them as simply further interaction partners beyond the immediate caregiving setting. That is to say when the child considers others as community members with whom she can interact as the activity requires without further considerations she can be understood as trusting them. This developmental sequence charts a movement from care to self-worth to an expectation of others responding to that sense of worth and that being manifest through their responses presupposing a person recognised as having a status as a community participant and being a relatively self-determining intrinsically vulnerable agent who is in turn expected to treat others similarly positioned in a correspondingly appropriate manner. Ultimately this developmental sequence clarifies how trust is bound up with the adoption of presuppositions regarding one’s standing, status or position as a person in relations with other persons in specific communities. The kind of developmental view Lawson endorses might be extended along these lines so as to clarify that coming to have a sense of worth is

⁹ In particular see McGeer (2002) and especially Bernstein (2015).

intimately connected to coming to expect to be treated in a particular manner by other community members and it is such expectations that underpin the development of a sense of trust.

The developmental orientation to trust is entirely consistent with, indeed is a necessary supplement to, Lawson's more recent emphasis on trust as the adhesive facilitating a degree of binding within a community. Stretching Lawson's emphasis on the centrality of social positioning it might be claimed that to be a community member is in a certain sense to be positioned by the community. An individual's status, standing or position as a community member is maintained via their continuous and persistent positioning by others in the community. From the kind of perspective Lawson develops being human is in part a social accomplishment achieved through our acceptance and following of certain collective practices. Under ordinary circumstances, trust is ultimately trust that other community members will respect one's standing or position as a recognised member of the community - and regulate their actions accordingly. Trust is at its most powerful when it operates unseen facilitating the collective practices guiding the cooperative activities that compose the dense practical engagements of community life.

In gathering support for a developmental orientation to trust Lawson considers how failures of trust can cause profound injury. The suggestion appears to be that it is only once some such developmental reading has been worked through that a full appreciation can be had of the devastating impacts inflicted by a collapse in or withdrawal of trust. Lawson examines the "human responses to situations in which continuity, sameness and trust are undermined" exploring those situations where "habitual modes of activity are swamped by anxiety which cannot be adequately contained by the basic security system". He suggests: "As individuals lose any certitude from the reproduction of rules and predictable routines they lose any sense of autonomy in action. At the limit they lose their most basic sense of control over their own physical doings" (1997b: 117).

Lawson offers a suggestive but brief analysis of such episodes¹⁰ one that can be substantially supplemented by drawing on recent contributions to the literature on trust and moral injury. Bernstein, for example, in defending his own developmental treatment of trust follows a similar path to Lawson but elaborates at considerable length on the damage that a loss of trust can impart. Bernstein catalogues how breaches in the trust regime cause moral injuries and explores in detail how these extend from the pains resulting from physical assaults, to humiliations, to degradations and ultimately to personal devastations. For Bernstein human beings are the sorts of beings who can undergo devastation by which he means they can be destroyed in their standing as a person within a community; they can have their dignity and self-respect systematically destroyed. He argues that when one loses one's dignity, one also loses one's trust in the world. Dignity is the representation of self-respect, where self-respect is the stance of one who takes herself to be of intrinsic worth and acts accordingly. Thus, for Bernstein, to respect human dignity is to respect an individual's standing as a being possessed of intrinsic worth.

5. Trust and Human Flourishing

Beyond the argument that the capacities of trusting and being trustworthy are the glue that binds society together and consideration of trust in developmental contexts Lawson also maintains that trust is a key condition required for generalised human flourishing. This argument is forwarded when he draws on his ontological theorising to defend a form of critical ethical naturalism.¹¹

¹⁰ In his discussion of these issues Lawson draws on the work of Giddens and his interpretation of Bettelheim's account of the profound effects of enforced de-routinisation on inmates in Nazi concentration camps.

The specific critical ethical naturalist position that Lawson defends is in a certain sense reductionist. He holds that there are no emergent (still less any transcendent or free floating) ethical objects irreducible to the rest of the natural world. Rather, Lawson maintains that ethical or moral terms, such as good, bad, right and wrong etc., share the same referents as non-moral terms.

Lawson's critical ethical naturalism involves a series of substantive arguments regarding human interests. These arguments may be summarised as follows. Lawson recognises that human beings have natures and are capable of flourishing and of doing so to different degrees. Morality he sees as existing throughout the human world. That is to say people always act in a context where assessments are made of those actions being right or wrong, good or bad. Human interests, the bases of our conditions for flourishing, cannot be reduced to wants or preferences. On Lawson's account each human being is a bundle of needs and capacities, and flourishing turns on the fulfilment of these needs and expression of these capacities. It follows, he suggests, that we can misunderstand what actually is in our interests. This in turn implies actually existing moralities can be criticised and that moral subjectivism is false. Yet there is no reason to suppose that there is one unique way of meeting these interests. Crucially Lawson views some human needs and capacities as being shared universally (examples he points to include needs to develop capacities of language use and generally to take part in forms of social interaction) but other needs are not universal. All needs are understood as being developed in specific historical and social/ cultural contexts. Human beings he characterises as being inherently relational. For Lawson we are each of us social-relationally constituted. He writes:

"From the moment we are conceived we are being socially moulded. And from birth onwards, if not earlier, we are positioned according to gender, class, nation, culture and so on. According to our positions we have rights and (eventually) obligations, that relate us to others, whether similarly positioned or positioned contrastively with our rights matched by their obligations and so on. We are necessarily relational beings" (2013b: 572).

According to Lawson it follows from our relational nature that our flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of others. Indeed he suggests it is in the interests of each of us that others around us and ultimately everyone flourishes, no matter what our similarities and differences so long as the flourishing of any one individual is not necessarily undermining of the flourishing of others. He maintains that "others are a part of what we are, or at least their flourishing is a part of our own, and in this we recognise intrinsic worth in others as we do in ourselves" (2015b: 362). Finally he argues that since we are born into non-human nature too, and constituted through our relations to it, it is in our interests that all of nature flourishes at least in so far as it is not intrinsically harmful to us.

For Lawson ontological discussion reveals that human beings are both complexly structured and unique concrete individualities, with each of us being historically situated within particular communities with specific collective practices, norms and rules. Because we are each unique but exist in society where everything we do affects others, he argues that a moral objective must be to transform society into a form that recognises our differences without our needing to suppress or suffer, for them. He notes that such a society is described by Marx as 'an association in which the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all'. Lawson maintains that given our best understanding of human nature, this is the only sort of conception we can justify pursuing, assuming it is feasible. It is he argues the formulation of society which allows that each and all of us remain true to ourselves, as

¹¹ For outlines of his critical ethical naturalism, see Lawson (2015c and 2013b) and for useful context and evaluation see, Martins (2013, part 3).

needy, socially formed human individuals. He suggests that such a social configuration deserves to be labelled the good society or, following Aristotle, the eudaimonistic society.

If ontological reasoning raises the contention that the good society is the only scenario in which we all can flourish Lawson argues that, assuming it is ultimately achievable, the good society so conceived ought to be built into all actions that can be interpreted as morally good. Within this framework actions are judged morally good or worthy according to the extent to which they facilitate well-being or flourishing. The extent to which they do so are substantive matters always dependent on context and this holds irrespective of our conceptions of whether or how well they do so. Thus Lawson maintains that the claim that ‘it is good to do x’ is true or false independently of our beliefs about the matter. He then addresses the question of whether the good society is actually realisable. He acknowledges the centrality of this question for his position as he concedes that if it can be shown not to be realisable then the claim that we should all act to bring it about is unlikely to be sustainable. He examines whether a tendency to the good society can be discerned. If such a tendency can be identified this helps address concerns about whether such a society is reachable. He argues that there is such a tendency, albeit one that operates in the face of powerful countervailing forces, and that it ultimately turns on our evolved dispositions both to care for and also interact with others.¹²

Trust for Lawson enters into this ethical discussion at a rather basic level. For example he writes that “[t]rust and trustworthiness is inherently bound up with human survival and flourishing” (2001:66) and suggests trust is an especially significant condition for generalised human flourishing:

‘Trust and cooperation seem to be fairly general conditions of human flourishing the question of the desirability of competition is likely to be far more sensitive to the prevailing conditions’ (2001: 17).

This emphasis on trust in the context of his critical ethical naturalism seems entirely appropriate given the substance of Lawson’s account of trust considered above. Trust is confidence in having a certain fundamental position, it involves the assumption that other community members will respect one’s standing as a member of the community and regulate their actions accordingly. Trust is bound up with a basic form of social positioning that involves an individual being treated as a member of the community able to engage in its collective practices. Individuals require positioning in order to have the social standing that enables participation in collective practices of the kind generally available in a community. Trust and the collective practices it supports may be usefully conceived of as the necessary medium underwriting the continuance of particular communities through promoting and maintaining the existence of its members as participants in that historically reproducing community. Given that on Lawson’s account we are creatures with community-oriented natures trust must be essential for our flourishing.

It is worth noting here that while trust features at rather a fundamental level in Lawson’s account of the good society such an emphasis only takes him so far. Trust and the collective practices it enable provide first and above all the bare necessary conditions for the possibility of self-sustaining and self-reproducing communities. They function to sustain the status of community members as they simultaneously maintain and promote social arrangements necessary for the reproduction of the community. Many communities very far removed from any ideals of human flourishing are ones where

¹² The recognition that there are strong and persistent countervailing tendencies that militate against generalised flourishing encourages Lawson to explore under the heading of *eudaimonic bubbles* the possibilities for effective and morally defensible practice that can bring about localised and qualified degrees of flourishing, see Lawson (2017).

trust has been established on a broad and deep basis and where collective practices are widely complied with. Communities where the organising structure is of such a nature that participants are constrained to act in ways that are harmful to themselves and others are based on trust. That is communities where hierarchy, domination and exploitation prevail are norm governed, expectations generating power arrangements that operate very substantially on the basis of trust. In such communities people must be able to trust each other and themselves to fulfil the obligations associated with the positions they occupy, follow collective practices and respond to the associated normative expectations. They must also trust each other to assert and enforce those normative expectations the organising structure requires individuals to have. In these kinds of cases, people are trusted to behave in ways that promote the narrow interests of some arbitrarily over others or expose some to subordination, exploitation, violence or marginality.¹³

For Lawson trust and the collective practices it enable are basic conditions required for human flourishing. Without them the very possibility of self-sustaining and self-reproducing human communities is undermined from the outset. Yet there is of course much more to human flourishing beyond these basic requirements¹⁴ and these conditions can be established and yet the good society remain a distant prospect.

6. Concluding Remarks

Tony Lawson assigns trust a significant role within his ontological framework but has not as yet produced an extended or systematic account. Focussing in on his various commentaries on trust and considering what they presuppose facilitates a better understanding of his general approach and suggests certain possible extensions.

The social positioning process is crucial to appreciating many of Lawson's central categories and this applies also to his account of trust. Trust, for Lawson, is the glue that binds the community together. I have suggested that this idea involves relating trust to a rather basic form of social positioning. Trust and social positioning are intimately connected. To see trust as the glue that binds is to connect trust to our native confidence that others will treat us as persons positioned as community participants. We are profoundly vulnerable beings who are dependent on others in innumerable ways. Trust relates to our anticipation or initial presumption that others will respect our standing or status as community participants and will regulate their actions toward us accordingly. This confidence or anticipation is presupposed in the positioning process whereby we acquire rights and obligations, that is to say that the social positioning process itself presupposes that an orientation of trust is widely and deeply established. Collective practices, norms and rules can only be effective to the extent that we have confidence that they are authoritative for the other community participants we are interacting with. Lawson has a multifaceted account of trust with it conceived of as a default orientation, a broad climate of expectation and a relation of mutual recognition whereby community participants acknowledge one another. Such an understanding of trust helps us to appreciate both its pervasiveness and likely invisibility.

¹³ For discussion of how trust underpins interaction and cooperation within all communities including those that are characterised by hierarchy, domination and exploitation, see Walker (2006, chapter 3).

¹⁴ Some still more substantial notion of trust might yet feature as well in discussions of what else human flourishing presupposes. It might be the case for example that the kind of account of trust offered by the Danish philosopher Knud Løgstrup (1971) provides one such perspective, see Stern (2017) for commentary and evaluation.

In addition to the view of trust as the glue binding the community together Lawson also points to a developmental analysis of how an orientation of trust is typically fostered. According to Lawson trust can be understood as responding to a basic psychological need for inner security. This fundamental need is initially attended to by predictable caring routines being established by an infant's immediate caregivers and thereafter by the characteristic routine modes of conduct prevalent throughout society. It is only once some such developmental reading has been worked through that it becomes possible to appreciate fully the devastating impact that certain kinds of moral injury can inflict. This developmental perspective on how an orientation of trust arises is not inconsistent with but rather a necessary supplement to the reading of trust as a constitutive condition of social interaction and community life. Lawson acknowledges that he supplies only the briefest sketch of these crucial developmental processes. I have pointed to resources that may be useful in fleshing out this developmental orientation to trust in a more sustained fashion.

A further context where trust features in Lawson's writings relates to his critical ethical naturalism. For Lawson eudaimonia or the 'good society' is a social system or totality in which we all flourish in our differences. While recognising that each of us is unique and is so in multiple ways, he argues that there are commonalities too. One such commonality he emphasises especially is that for each of us our own flourishing requires that everyone else flourishes. I have highlighted that for Lawson generalised human flourishing requires the fostering, maintenance and extension of trust and trustworthiness. For Lawson trust is among the most basic (albeit hardly sufficient) conditions for human flourishing as without it the very possibility of self-sustaining and self-reproducing human communities is undermined.

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